

Human Rights in Iran and The Need for Improved Access to Information

Meir Javedanfar

Abstract

In the on-going struggle for human rights in Iran, access to information plays a fundamental role in empowering the masses. Just as the west is systematically following up Iran's nuclear dossier, so should Western powers follow Iran's human rights dossier and through effective measures help Iranians, both inside Iran and abroad, make better-informed choices that lead to human rights-based governance.

Biography

Meir Javedanfar is the co-author of "The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran". He teaches the "Contemporary Iranian Politics" course at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) at Herzliya, and is also the Director of the Tel Aviv based Middle East Economic and Political Analysis Company (MEEPAS). Meir is a regular commentator for BBC Persian, The Guardian newspaper as well as CNN Español and serves as an expert on the United Nation Alliance of Civilisations - Global Experts Resource Project. He holds a Masters degree in International Relations and Strategic Studies from Lancaster University in the United Kingdom.

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Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, in its dealings with the Iranian government, the Western World has faced mounting challenges. This is especially true when it comes to Iran's nuclear program. Despite attempts at diplomacy and threats of military action, as well as UN sanctions, the Iranian government is still continuing to enrich Uranium and the west has been unable to stop this process.

The international community has every right to be concerned about Iran's nuclear programme. This is especially true for Iran's neighbours. The overwhelming majority of them do not want to see this regime armed with nuclear weapons.

However, what the international community, especially the Western World, has failed to take notice of until very recently is another important and powerful factor in Iran - its people and the mutual benefits that strengthening links with them could bring.

Although this would be against the wishes of Iran's rulers, and they would try their level best to prevent this from happening, nevertheless, there are ways of sidestepping them in order to reach out to the people of Iran. The promotion of the issue of human rights in Iran is an extremely powerful way of doing this.

Over the last three decades, when it came to condemning the Iranian government for its abuse of human rights, the western world has been either silent, or spoken at barely more than a whisper.

Only lately do we see the issue of human rights being addressed by the European Union and the United States. The sanctions imposed against human rights abusers such as Head of Iran's Internal Security Forces, Ahmad Reza Radan, are undoubtedly a step in the right

direction. Although he dismissed them as a “joke”, nevertheless the meaning of the sanctions has not been lost on the people of Iran. It speaks volumes when a superpower such as the EU or the US sides with the people and against officials who have no qualms about imprisoning, torturing or even killing ordinary Iranians.

Sanctions in themselves are not sufficient. Calling for improvement in human rights should be an ongoing process. The next step, which the West should take to help promote and improve the issue of human rights in Iran, is to help facilitate access to information there. This is very important, as access to valid, quality information about human rights issues in Iran would be a very powerful weapon in fighting human rights abuse.

For now this remains a formidable challenge, especially when it comes to places outside of Tehran and other major cities. The West and the Iranian Diaspora seem to know very little about what is happening to human rights of Iranians in such areas. Even when it comes to major cities like Tehran, information can be difficult to obtain. The Iranian government, through restrictions placed on the Internet and the press has made it difficult for news about human rights issues to reach the outside world.

The lack of information also leads to the creation of rumours, which in some cases have made it more difficult to ascertain the true course of events. This is in addition to a sustained propaganda campaign by the Iranian government, which lies about its human rights policies and actions. This has been witnessed on numerous occasions.

Government officials such as Javad Larijani, who heads the Human Rights Council of the Iranian Judiciary, have no problem declaring in front of the entire international community that “Torture is against Iran's policy.” In reality, such officials know that their statements are far from the truth. However, the issue of human rights has become so sensitive and difficult to defend, that English-speaking officials such as Larijani have no qualms about making such outrageous statements, in order to keep international criticism and scrutiny into the matter at a minimum.

Knowledge is power, and the more we know about what is happening inside Iran in terms of human rights the more the international community will be able to make appropriate and accurate decisions. There are a number of ways, in which the international community and the West could especially help to facilitate access to information on human rights in Iran.

Increased access to the internet is one way. The US government recently started this through lifting the ban on the export of Internet-based communication services to Iran. This should be expanded. During the recent uprising in Libya, the Qaddafi government shut the internet down completely. However XS4ALL, an ISP operating in Holland, opened up its phone lines to allow people whose Internet access has been cut off in Libya to access the Internet via their dial-up modems. The same should be done to Iran, especially during and after demonstrations, when internet is shut down or the speed is decreased in order to make it more difficult for users to share information and upload photos and clips. Through improved access, especially during demonstrations or their immediate aftermath, we are likely to have a much better understanding of what is really going on in Iran, and what human rights related abuses are taking place there.

The other way is to allow human rights inspectors access to Iran. Just as the UN has nuclear inspectors working for its subsidiary, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) who inspect Iran's nuclear facilities, the UN through its Human Rights Council should start

sending inspectors to view what is happening in Iran's prisons and courts. More importantly, the UN should make the lifting of sanctions conditional on the improvement of human rights. With the recent uprising and government killings in Libya strengthening calls for improved human rights conditions, the UN should seize the opportunity and improve its presence and voice in countries where human rights are most at risk, especially Iran. Human rights-related UN visits and inspections to Iran would also allow the West to have a better understanding and access to more valid information regarding what is really going on there. This will not be easy, and initially it may even prove to be impossible. In that case, the West and the UN should still insist that lifting of major economic sanctions is strictly conditional upon improvements in human rights.

When it comes to engaging the Iranian government on human rights issues, they should not be prevented from attending meetings; rather they should be invited and encouraged. Should Iranian officials continue to make outlandish and inaccurate statements such as "Torture is against Iran's policy", then that only makes it easier for the UN to highlight the Iranian government's unacceptable behaviour.⁴³ Mr Javad Larijani may think he is defending the revolution by making such a statement. However, in reality he is causing great damage to his government's standing, especially in the area of human rights, far more than the West could. This could then be used to pressure the Iranian government to provide more information on its human rights actions.

Indeed, it is also possible that the pressure that Iran and its representatives feel in such meetings may start convincing them to lobby for a change of policy back home.

The Iranian community in the Diaspora can also play a part in helping to improve access to human rights information from Iran, and the promotion of human rights there. Bipartisan conferences are needed among Iranians abroad, where scholars, activists and businessmen get together and promote this important issue. The creation of 'non-political' human rights data bank would be a recommended follow up from such a forum.

At the same time, when it comes to choosing an opposition party, Iranians outside of Iran should make human rights in Iran their first priority. Any Iranian political party, which does not agree to such a demand, should be shown the red card. Failure to do this could mean the continuation of abuse of human rights in Iran, even if the current regime falls and is replaced by another government.

⁴³ In an interview with Euronews in February 2010 Mohammad Javad Larijani, the head of Iran's High Council for Human Rights made this comment. Please see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JOrpvN9nKo> [Accessed 17 April 2011]